

Black Swans Haunt Eurasia's Great Game

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The battle lines in the 21st century's Great Game aimed at shaping the creation of a new Eurasia-centred world, built on the likely fusion of Europe and Asia into what former Portuguese Europe minister **Bruno Macaes calls a "supercontinent,"** are all but cast in cement.

For now, the Great Game pits China together with Russia, Turkey, and Iran against the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. The two camps compete for influence, if not dominance, in a swath of land that stretches from the China Sea to the Atlantic coast of Europe.

The flashpoints are multiple. They range from the China Sea to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Central European nations and, most recently, far beyond with **Russia, China and Turkey supporting embattled Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro.**

The rivalry resembles **Risk, a popular game** of diplomacy, conflict, and conquest played on a board depicting a political map of the earth, divided into forty-two territories, which are grouped into six continents. Multiple players commanding armies that seek to capture territories engage in a complex dance as they strive for advantage and seek to compensate for weaknesses. Players form opportunistic alliances that could change at any moment. Potential black swans threaten to disrupt.

The black swans in the Great Game are multiple and far more numerous than those developed in a just-published report by the Paris-based European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). Nonetheless, the scenarios conceptualized in the report, **"What If? Scanning the horizon: 12 scenarios for 2021,"** are grounded in recent trends and could prove to be game changers that radically rejigger the Great Game's current line-up.

The scenarios or grey swans in the report's terminology, if they unfold in reality, suggest that alliances in Eurasia are opportunistic and transactional and like with Risk can turn players on their erstwhile allies as interests diverge and re-converge. Analysis of five of the scenarios suggests that fragility is greatest in the efforts of China, Russia, Turkey, and Iran to rebalance global power in their favor.

They suggest that strains in the United States' relations with Russia and Turkey are not immutable. Similarly, Russia's effort to lock in former Soviet republics with its Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) that groups Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Armenia could prove to be on shaky ground. Russia's alliance with Turkey and China as well as Iran even if the report has not developed the latter possibility may be on thinner ice than meets the eye.

The same can be said for grey swans in the United States' ties to its long-standing allies as is played out in the report's scenario for a withdrawal of US troops from Europe as a result of President Donald J. Trump's accentuation of diverging trans-Atlantic interests.

With a multi-polar world the likely outcome of the battle for Eurasia, the scenarios suggest that the perceived decline of the United States, despite Mr. Trump's unilateralism, is not irreversible. Similarly, depending on how it plays its cards, Iran could emerge either as a winner or a loser.

The four scenarios involve a renewed round of popular protest in the Arab world following the reversal of successful revolts in 2011 in Egypt, Libya and Yemen and the embrace of brutal repression; political violence in the Caucasus that pits Turkey against Russia and could

threaten key nodes along China's Belt and Road; the dissolution of the Eurasian Economic Union in an approaching post-Vladimir Putin era; a rejigging of the political map of south-eastern Europe and a strengthening of European cohesion with the US troop withdrawal and resolution of tension between Serbia and Kosovo.

The notion of renewed popular Arab protests, including resistance to the influence of militias in Syria and Libya, that could rewrite the political map of the Middle East is hardly far-fetched with **mass anti-government demonstrations** in Sudan persisting for more than a month; riots in Tunisia, the one relatively successful 2011 revolt; protests on the West Bank against a new social security law; and **anti-government marches in Iraq**.

If anything, the revolts highlight the risks that all players in the Great Game run by supporting autocratic regimes that have largely failed to sustainably deliver public goods and services and/or offer good governance and cater to the social, economic and political aspirations of young populations.

"Pressure for change across the Arab world is likely to continue to grow, keeping pace with the growth in populations, inequality, and social injustice," concluded journalist Simon Tisdall **on the eighth anniversary of the uprising in Egypt** that toppled president Hosni Mubarak but was ultimately defeated by a military coup two years later.

The European Union Institute's report imagines a massive attack on the Baku Kars rail line, a vital node in the Belt and Road's linking of China to Europe that rekindles dormant local animosities as well as competing for Russian and Turkish economic and geostrategic interests, prompting both Moscow and Ankara to lobby Washington for US support.

Similarly, a scenario envisaging Kazakhstan and Belarus withdrawing from the Eurasian union because of its inability to live up to its ambition of furthering regional integration sparks fears in Moscow that the demise of the regional consortium could spark the collapse of the *Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)*, a military alliance that groups the five Eurasian union members as well as Tajikistan and hosts Afghanistan and Serbia as observers. The dissolution of the two organizations would significantly undermine Russia's regional standing.

Likewise, a swap of land between Serbia and Kosovo that purifies two countries whose inter-communal relations have been poisoned by historic prejudices and recent wars opens a Pandora's Box across south-eastern Europe but eases their accession to the European Union while a US troop withdrawal would force EU members to focus on collective security.

It would only take one of these scenarios to unfold and potentially spark a revisiting of the current line-up in the Great Game. Anyone of the scenarios is a realistic possibility.

Said European Union Institute deputy director Florence Gaub in her introduction to the report: *"Grey Swans share with Black Swans a high level of strategic impact, but there is more evidence to support the idea that they are actually possible... The analogy with the 1985 film 'Back to the Future' is pure coincidence, of course – but just as in the film, we sometimes need to take a trip to the future to inform our decision-making today."*

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